

Reducing healthcare costs by improving health literacy

—submitted by the Patient Education Committee

What is the strongest predictor of a person's health?

- A) Age
- B) Income
- C) Employment status
- D) Race
- E) Education level
- F) Health literacy

The answer may surprise you.

It's 'E,' health literacy. Health literacy, as defined by the US Department of Health and Human Services, is "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions." In addition to reading, patients need to be proficient in numeracy, verbal communication, use of technology, the ability to find pertinent information, and the ability to evaluate information. Unfortunately, in the United States, many people struggle with health literacy. The first, large-scale, national assessment revealed that only 12% of Americans are health literate. This can result in dire consequences for patients and the entire healthcare system.

Individuals with low health literacy have higher hospitalization rates, longer hospital stays, greater use of emergency services, and greater difficulty controlling chronic illnesses. This costs the US an estimated 238 billion dollars in additional healthcare expenditures.

To raise awareness about health literacy and provide tools for staff to effectively teach patients, the Patient Education Committee offered several events during the month of October, Health Literacy Month. First, was a presentation, entitled "How to Take an Active Role in Your Health Care," presented by Andrea Powers, RN, of Health Dialog in collaboration with the Shared Decision-Making Program. Patients learned how to articulate health concerns, accurately describe symptoms, and ask pertinent questions, all essential components of health literacy. The committee also hosted an educational booth in the Main Corridor and distributed materials to help patients become active partners in their care.

Jen Searl, health education project specialist for the The Blum Patient & Family Learning Center, presented, "Health Literacy, Just the Facts Ma'am," a talk aimed more at staff than patients. Searl spoke about the concept of health literacy, the adverse effects of low health literacy, and explained techniques like teach back/show back and plain language. Teach back/show back involves having patients 'teach back' what they've just learned. Clinicians use open-ended questions such as, "Tell me how you're going to take this medication when you get home." Plain language is a way of composing written materials so the information is simple, clear, and easy to understand. Searl emphasized that while readability (i.e., the reading grade level) is important, there are many components to plain language, including content, organization, style, and formatting.

According to Judy Gullage, RN, co-chair of the Patient Education Committee, "The committee has provided patients and clinicians with many opportunities to learn about health literacy. I'm truly impressed with the commitment of the Patient Education Committee champions to improve patient-education at MGH."

For more information about health literacy or to have a document edited or evaluated for plain language, contact Jen Searl at 4-3823.

